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GREAT WOMEN'S DAUGHTERS

BY FLORENCE LEFTWICH RAVENEL

IN France, and in France only, is there a tradition of famous women. Here and there from time to time, in other lands, a feminine genius has appeared, fulfilled her appointed task and died, leaving a more or less solid achievement in science, literature or art. But set in no framework of history, with no background of custom and precedent, she has lacked the charm of perspective as well as the substantial dignity and prestige—the birthright of that slender chain of distinguished Frenchwomen of letters, beginning with Marguerite of Navarre in the sixteenth century and extending to Arvede Barine in the twentieth—which is one of the unique glories of France. And looking down the line of those whose fame has endured, substantially undimmed, I find three and three only who have possessed among all their other gifts of nature and fortune, each a daughter—a girl, whose identity of sex added to her inherited resemblance to her mother make of her, irrespective of her individual characteristics, a personage of no ordinary interest and significance. The sons of these women (and on the whole their sons outnumber their daughters) grew up average men—neither better nor worse than their fellows; but the girls were different. Each of them drew from her mother a well-marked and decided personality, while from her father and from other remoter ancestors, she inherited contrasting, even antipathetic, qualities and instincts. Each of them grew up by her mother's side, and though they differed from one another in almost every conceivable way, these three daughters had one feature in common: Françoise Marguerite de Sévigné, Comtesse de Grignan, Albertine de Staël, Duchesse de Broglie, neither more nor less than Solange Dudevant Sand, Mme. Clesinger. For each of them, love and loyalty to her famous mother was the strongest

feeling of her heart; admiration and reverence for her mother's genius the one article of faith which admitted neither question nor dispute.

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I have always been sorry for Françoise de Sévigné, though I must admit that my sympathy is grudgingly given. So ungracious and ungraceful is the nature which the mother's letters unconsciously reveal in the daughter, that all the legends of the girl's beauty bring no conviction to the mind, and in fancy we see her as stiff, conventional and unbending in form and feature as she undoubtedly was in disposition and character. Mme. de Sévigné carries her audience with her on every theme but this—the very one, alas! which she had most at heart—the charms and perfections of Françoise. Her young and dissolute father bequeathed to her a fragile and often suffering body, an extravagant taste and—perhaps—a defective sense of humor; from her mother she took her keen critical intelligence and a certain rugged, indomitable honesty and scorn of shams; while all Mme. de Sévigné's lighter, more delicate and elusive virtues, which were graces as well, went shamelessly in a body to the young Charles, the delightful, if often unedifying, scapegrace son, who divided so unevenly with Françoise the mental and spiritual heritage of the family.

It was not an easy lot, that of the girl. She was herself, and at the same time she was Mme. de Sévigné's daughter. She must move about that little brilliant sarcastic world, by the side of her popular and fascinating mother, knowing (and from a very early period she surely did know or suspect) that she supplied the most effective foil for her mother's vivacious, expansive personality. No doubt Mme. de Sévigné herself was somewhat to blame for her daughter's hard precocity. From her earliest years Françoise was a petted, over-indulged child—spoiled by her mother's friends as well as by her mother—to whose good graces a compliment or a favor to her idol was always an open sesame; and if at first both women were persuaded that the affectionate enthusiasm of Mme. de Sévigné's friends was equally warm and sincere in its appreciation of Françoise, the disillusionment that awaited them (never acknowledged by the mother) must have come with a cruel shock to the girl's moody, secretive, suspicious spirit. For neither de Bussy nor Mme.

de Lafayette, nor (with one or two exceptions) any of Mme. de Sévigné's intimates, seems really to have liked or approved of Françoise.

Child study had not been invented in the seventeenth century, and such minute and respectful attention to children's ways and words would have shocked an age when every effort was bent to ignore and disavow the period between birth and maturity. But again Françoise was different, and from a very early stage we see her later qualities and tendencies already clearly sketched in the portrait of the very little girl. From the first delightful picture, drawn by a contemporary, of the two lovely children seated in the family coach, one on each side of their charming young mother, when for the first time after the death of the Marquis they made the journey up from Brittany to Paris, each successive view that we catch of Françoise shows her always the same—a keen, sharp-edged, determined little person, proud, self-conscious, sensitive, whose habitual self-restraint was broken sometimes by one of those whirlwinds of anger—amusing enough as related by her mother's gilt-edged pen, but of evil omen, surely, for the future woman's happiness and credit.

On the other hand, nothing that art or effort could accomplish to complete and perfect her natural development, was spared by a mother who was not only an excellent judge of education, but herself a product of the very best kind. Literature Françoise did not really love; Mme. de Sévigné reproaches her gently, but with manifest sincerity, for her indifference to that general reading which furnished so priceless a solace to her mother and brother in their long dreary winters in Brittany. But in the popular philosophy of the time—in Descartes and Jansenius, and the hazy hair-splitting discussions of their schools, Françoise professed a deep and vital interest—admired but not emulated by her mother. She soon forgot her very small Latin, but of Italian she had a fair knowledge—probably of Spanish also; and her dancing was as nearly professional as that of a young patrician could decently be. From her fourteenth year, moreover, she had abundant occasion to exploit this as well as her other accomplishments, for she took a prominent part in the fêtes, masques and ballets of the young king's sumptuous court. These were her golden days; court poets celebrated her charms, court chronicles described her dancing

and—a final climax of her celebrity—it was whispered (not in her mother's hearing, we may be sure) that Louis himself was casting covetous glances at her fresh and girlish beauty. A golden moment, but a moment only! The facile admiration excited by her fair face did not deepen into affection or esteem. She had few suitors, and those that appeared she did not encourage. Perhaps ambition, perhaps only temperamental coldness, held her aloof.

Mme. de Sévigné's maternal enthusiasm meanwhile did not falter, though with the flight of the years, she came to look upon this handsome, reserved and difficult daughter as a sort of riddle of the Sphinx—to be read only by the man of destiny for whom they both waited. Five years after the deceptively brilliant *début* the mother could still write to the sugary but perfidious Bussy, in response to his two-edged inquiries: "The prettiest girl in France sends you her greetings; that is a fairly good name for her, to my mind, and yet I am weary of doing the honors for that same girl all these many years." And a little later, "The prettiest girl in France is more worthy than ever of your esteem and affection. Her destiny is so hard to foretell that I for one give it up."

It was not a romantic destiny, when at last it declared itself. To be the third wife of a middle-aged man, with embarrassed fortune and a family of grown-up children—this was surely but a tame solution of a problem so long canvassed, so eagerly discussed. But the marriage which brought such cruel loneliness and deprivation to the mother was not without its fortunate aspects after all. The young Comtesse de Grignan never professed to be in love with her husband—indeed, Françoise was no likely subject for that passion which implies, we are told, a sort of spiritual dissolution, a kind of inward disintegration and rebirth; and to such experiences this logical, self-contained, calculating nature was and remained a stranger. But in her intercourse with her husband, nevertheless, Françoise was undoubtedly at her best. The Count was a man of the highest breeding, not of conspicuous talent or even very sound judgment, but a gentleman even in his faults. Throughout their long married life together they maintained a relation of staunch comradeship and sympathetic co-operation, as also of mutual tact and forbearance, which makes of their union a very pleasant oasis in a generation of Montespons,

Lafayettes, Rochefaucaulds and Scarrons. As a mother, again, Mme. de Grignan comes into violent contrast with her own. Were not our minds full of Mme. de Sévigné's maternal devotion the attitude of the younger woman toward her daughters would seem less repulsively cold and judicial. Mme. de Sévigné's efforts to arouse and encourage in Françoise some tenderness and enthusiasm for her children, and especially for the little girl, give us a curious insight into these two so different hearts.

But it is in her relations to her mother that Mme. de Grignan especially challenges our curiosity and interest, and it is here, too, that, joining the ranks of the heretics, I am best able to understand her case and find most to plead in extenuation of her pitiful inadequacy and failure. For, Sunday School moralists to the contrary notwithstanding, a cold heart is rarely melted by contact with a warm one—nay, rather, a mere indifference and lack of active response is often changed to a positive resistance, an impulse to escape, to elude the pressure and the exacting, absorbing inroads of a love that gives and demands all. The object of a great but unreturned passion bears a heavy burden and wears inevitably a most unlovely mien. How often must poor Françoise have winced and shuddered in secret as she contemplated her own image in the minds of her mother's friends! Yet, after all, is it not a proof of this woman's integrity, of the essential soundness of her ill-starred nature, that the years which so commonly confirm and intensify the warps and twists of the natural bent, did really and greatly temper and soften the asperity of her character? The simple unpretending nobleness of her mother's life must have appealed with an ever-growing force to one accessible always, through her judgment rather than through her emotions, while the humiliating collapse of her own and her husband's ambitious schemes must surely bring into stronger relief the one perfectly unselfish love and service she had ever known. Yet when at last Mme. de Sévigné died Françoise had only stiff and stilted phrases wherewith to communicate her loss to her mother's old friends. She had not the gift of tears any more than the gift of laughter. Once more we see her as at the beginning, the victim of a contrast as inevitable as it is essentially unjust. She was too intelligent, too much a woman of her time, not to appreciate her mother's delightful literary and social gifts; yet in her

inmost heart she may perhaps have harbored always an obscure sense of injury and wrong. Since for all time she must be judged—not by the standard of the average good and clever woman which she was, but by another far higher, more delicate and exacting criterion: the criterion of her mother's unique and incomparable genius and personality.

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After Françoise de Sévigné, Albertine de Staël! Suddenly we pass from the harsh light, the sharp outlines, the crude and glaring colors of a midsummer day, into a region of perpetual twilight. The forms are blurred and faint, a silence falls over the noonday noise, a coolness breathes through the languid air. She was a lovely girl if we may judge by her portraits, with a beauty as delicate, refined and noble as her spirit. No desire of conquest or admiration seems ever to have troubled her devout, even austere, ideal of duty, or competed with her thirst for peace, for seclusion, for time and a free heart, to give to her dear ones, to her religion and to that serious and weighty reading and meditation—her taste for which was a direct legacy from her Grandmother Necker. If ever a frail and gentle being was born for the hidden and sheltered life, it was this!

But this release from the world, for which, even in early youth, she was longing, was never to be hers; and such happiness and fruition as came to her she must always snatch, as it were, in the midst of alarms. It would seem almost as if the sort of inner dread, the shrinking from life, which she could never overcome or wholly conceal, had been stamped upon her soul at birth—a penalty of the conditions under which she was born and of the well-founded terrors and anxieties of her childish experience. For years she had wandered with her mother, a fugitive through Europe, pursued by Napoleon's tyrannical spite, accompanied now by a more or less equivocal escort, again by servants, while sometimes it was those two alone against the world. And the very real perils to which she was exposed had for Albertine none of the alleviations of the sense of martyrdom or of the inward flame, the constant intellectual excitement, which tempered the miseries of exile for Mme. de Staël.

The young girl adored her mother with all the unquestioning loyalty of a neophyte and all the yearning tenderness

of a daughter, and yet, to one who reads between the lines of the younger woman's letters and the scanty records which we have of her life, there is more than a suggestion that, as she grew older, her mother's substantial and ever brightening fame acquired for her, nevertheless, something equivocal—to be dreaded as well as loved. For in spite of Mme. de Staël's steady and honorable endeavors to protect this childish mind from a premature knowledge of evil, inevitably the girl's conscience and heart were more and more clouded and oppressed by the perception of her mother's anomalous position—of that constant publicity and controversy which, with or without her own connivance, followed the daughter of Necker, the enemy of Napoleon, the author of *Corinne*, wherever she went.

We may surmise that in spite of her loyalty, her passionate partisanship, her mother's agitated tempestuous career had left deep in the young girl's soul a secret wound—never acknowledged; never healed; and, who knows? perhaps Albertine would have sacrificed all Mme. de Staël's great renown, her world-wide influence and relations, could she, by the same act, have washed from her mother's life and name every moral stain and made of her a blameless wife and mother like herself. The strain of Puritanic austerity, so marked in Mme. Necker, had revived in the third generation, in a gentler, sweeter, less aggressive form, without the dross of vanity and egotism. And now, united to a very humble estimate of her own worth and ability, Albertine had that timorous recoil from evil—that shrinking from the world, chiefly because of its power to soil and corrupt—which has in all ages driven certain pure spirits to the cloister, or, at all events, made them incapable of grappling with the ugly facts of life.

Mme. de Staël had often declared, in her intense and emphatic way, that “she should force her daughter to make a marriage of inclination.” Fortunately the mother's choice for Albertine was so pre-eminently worthy that there could be no need of persuasion—of coercion. The union of the young Duke and Duchess de Broglie was complete and satisfying inwardly as it was brilliant outwardly, and advantageous from every point of view. But her marriage did not bring to the duchess her release from the world; rather it assured to her for her whole life the busy, restless, outwardly futile and frivolous existence of a “society woman”

and the mistress of a great official salon. Her published letters, many of which date from this period of social and political activity and prominence, reveal a nature of the highest and rarest moral distinction, united to a physical and nervous organization extremely fragile, and shattered probably from her earliest youth, and an intelligence which rises above the mediocre only when her eyes are turned inward upon the scene of her spiritual and emotional life. Her observations upon politics, upon literature, upon the state of the Nation, the frivolities and follies of her social world, are sound and reasonable enough, but without special savor in substance or even grace and vivacity in expression. But when the young mother suddenly is called to look upon the ruins of her House of Life her voice rises to a strain of such simple, poignant eloquence as perhaps the great Corinne could scarcely have achieved. When her oldest and best beloved daughter Pauline is snatched from her side at fourteen Mme. de Broglie finds words to interpret, not only her individual loss, but—a very different thing—the sorrows of all spirits as finely tempered as her own.

To this woman the light of day revealed, as it were, only the obvious; she had little natural affinity for joy or sunshine. But when the night began to fall, black and full of dread, there rose upon this shy and shrinking spirit a gleam of immortal light. In this dim region she moves as one at ease; all her doubts and tremors stilled, she speaks as one having authority; and with a firm hand, a sure touch, she unlocks the inmost secret of the soul. In a letter to a friend of her girlhood Mme. de Broglie writes, toward the end of her life: “When I remember all the experiences through which I have tested God’s goodness, how He has upheld me in the bitterest trials, by what ways He has led me to a perfect peace, I know not how to express my gratitude to Him.”

And upon this note we would gladly let the plaintive voice die away into silence; though the impression left by her letters, and the few reminiscences and anecdotes that remain, is, on the whole, less that of peace than of resigned but inveterate melancholy—so fundamental that religion, friendship, domestic affection and prosperity were alike powerless to dispel it. It would seem that of all her famous mother’s conspicuous characteristics one alone had descended in full measure upon this, the best loved and most distinguished of her children; and now, unrelieved by her

fervid enthusiasms, her passionate faith in herself and in her inspired mission to mankind, as well as by others of her less exalted and noble qualities, Mme. de Staël's "incurable ennui" held tyrannical sway over a gentler, more sensitive, less brilliant and aggressive spirit, to its own fatal loss and hurt.

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Neither Françoise de Sévigné nor Albertine de Staël could be counted a very happy woman, and yet to each of them there fell a goodly portion of dignity, honor and success. No question can arise here of shipwreck, moral or material, of ruin and bankruptcy in all that makes life precious—to those at least who do not live by bread alone. We must seek new standards—must choose a new vocabulary, even—before we open the record of Solange Dudevant—Mme. Clesinger, the only daughter of George Sand. Yet it is not in the gifts of nature that we must look for this disparity. Among these three women, it is in Solange only that a spark of the divine fire smoulders—at least in youth.

When in 1828 Solange Dudevant was born, five years after her brother Maurice, the first great disillusionment had already come to George Sand. The sordid miseries of her married life had brought a rude awakening from the sort of temperamental lethargy of her earlier years, while the great emotional upheaval of the time to come was as yet undreamed of even by herself. Yet we need adopt no questionable theory of pre-natal influence to perceive that the birth and early childhood of Solange fell upon most unlucky days. George Sand's feminism was always strongly individual and took no account of systems; she professed no revolt against the limitations of sex nor the age-long immolation of mothers. But instinctively she was grasping at the whole of life; in her capacious clasp she sought to enfold all joy, all emotion, all experiences known to humanity; and however such magnificent aspirations may fall in with advanced modern theories, they have in practice been judged hitherto inconsistent with motherhood.

Solange was five years old during her mother's memorable first winter in Italy and her overwhelming adventure with de Musset. For the time all saner impulses and feelings were overpowered, all normal interests and duties blotted out; and though, after a season, reason returned and with it, as always, a keen solicitude for her children's well

being, yet the mother, with characteristic optimism, seems to have looked to her own direct precepts—always, let us say to her honor, admirably wholesome, sound, sincere and practical—to neutralize such failure in her example as might have filtered through to the young girl's ears and understanding. But alas! here she was reckoning without Solange. For Solange incarnated from her earliest years those qualities, good and bad, most alien, antipathetic, unintelligible, even, to her mother's nature and taste. Far from condemning the temperamental exuberance of George Sand's youth, Solange would appear to have admired it, to have envied its romantic excesses—that tremendous fullness of life and faith and hope which enabled the young author of *Lélia* to move straight and swiftly to her goal in the face of all laws and conventions. Such a youth, such conquests, such loves, would have been to Solange an ideal career, and it is only the sober, laborious, *bourgeois* side of the picture and of her mother's nature—never really effaced even in her most tempestuous escapades—that would have seemed prosaic, dull, intolerable to her daughter's luxurious, even somewhat snobbish taste. To float idly in a gondola on the Grand Canal, a lover at her feet, the songs of boatmen and the splash of moonlit waves in her ears—Solange could have done that, too, with incomparable grace; but the long hours of arduous labor that followed—reaching far into the night—the urgent appeals to publishers in Paris, the unsleeping dread of failing resources, sickness and debt; these were quite inconsistent with Solange's idea of romance. Moreover, however cordial her admiration for her mother might be, it must be conceded that the grounds of it were not such as give weight and sanction to parental counsels, exhortations or reproofs; and, as I have said elsewhere, Fate in its most revengeful mood could scarcely have devised a subtler yet more efficacious punishment for George Sand's many faults than the sort of travesty of her own career, the parody on her own brave fight for freedom, her revolt against social tyranny, offered by the tragi-comedy of her daughter's life.

The story of Solange, her long, stormy, frivolous, most unedifying career, is unhappy and disappointing almost from the beginning. Her wayward childhood—periods of maternal neglect followed by intervals of anxious, careful, too strenuous training at home or at school; her capricious

girlhood, here perversity and charm seem for a moment to hold the balance even; her early, inexplicable marriage to one whose unworthiness she seems perfectly to have known and whom she married perhaps quite as much with the object of displeasing and humiliating her mother as for her own satisfaction; her wretched married life with its continual quarrels and still more frequent financial crises, its short intervals of factitious prosperity and notoriety, followed by long desert stretches of poverty, sordid expedients and an ever accelerating moral *dégringolade*: are they not all written in the many chronicles of George Sand's life and times?

And of all natures hers was, as I have said, the least fitted to appeal to George Sand, to whom the word *caprice* was unintelligible, and who could write of this same Solange, "This creature whom I have brought into the world,—I have nursed her, whipped her, adored her, spoiled and scolded, punished and forgiven, and yet—in spite of it all she has remained to me a stranger!"

Emotionally, always, a shadow and barren soil, passionate without tenderness, never quite oblivious of the gallery even in her deepest experiences, Solange yet possessed an intellectual gift that is likely to keep a place for her so long as George Sand is remembered among men. She was dazzlingly, delightfully witty. Her letters have a felicity of touch, an airy grace and lightness that disarm our displeasure, even as, in her lifetime, they so often turned the edge of her mother's rebukes and drew from her a half reluctant smile. For the sallies of Solange are often as keen and cruel as they are brilliant, and serve to convey her bitterness of spirit, her ironical scorn of herself and of others—in itself half a pose. She had occasionally a spurt of industry, a gust of ambition which carried her fluently through all the preliminary plans and programs of her literary undertakings even to the verge of their bibliographies, but evaporated infallibly under the strain of the first week's work. A dilettante in all things, she never took herself seriously in any relation; and over words and gestures, feelings and opinions there hangs always a suspicion of unreality which dries our tears, checks our sympathy, and in time enables us to understand and in part to share George Sand's—at first—rather disconcerting attitude toward this her only daughter. Her mother had for Solange

beside a purely natural and instinctive affection a great and troubled solicitude, passing in turn, under our very eyes, to a sentiment compounded of pity, terror and contempt. How far the great and famous author felt herself responsible for this shipwrecked existence, this warped and perverted career, we cannot tell—whether conscience ever smote her, in her long and honorable maturity and later years, with the insinuation that among all the errors, the pleasant vices of her passionate youth, Solange herself was the worst, the most indestructible, the most fatal by far: this we shall never know. So far as we can tell, that proud head was never bowed to God or man in the humility of sincere repentance.

Poor Solange! no doubt she hated sermons, and cared little to serve her generation either as warning or example. But posterity has pressed her into service, nevertheless. The moral that George Sand would not heed we are here to enforce. The legend from which she averted her eyes is writ large across the page of history.

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Nature is not unjust or cruel, but she is no spendthrift either, and her reckonings hold over from one generation to another. Those three daughters of genius were not happy women; half unconsciously they dwelt each in the shadow of her famous mother—of the high, imposing personality that went before, and shut out from her too much of the light of common day. And that is, after all, the only light by which the uninspired children of men can walk securely, uprightly and in peace.

If Françoise, Albertine and Solange could speak to us without constraint there might well come from the depths of each heart, free from all conventions, proprieties and obligations, the words of the old adage—with a difference: “Happy the daughters whose mothers have no history!”

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